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ABSTRACT

In school districts throughout the United States, at-risk students are receiving remedial instruction in learning centers outside the classroom. Because this separation increases the likelihood that students will receive a fragmented education, learning center staff should provide remedial students with "curricular congruence," or content and strategies needed for success in subject matter classrooms. This approach has been implemented at a Long Island (New York) high school, where students in the learning center read the same books as do those in the content area classroom, and staff help the students develop strategies that lead to independence in the English classroom. This is achieved through cooperation between learning center staff and content area teachers, and the process benefits both the students and the teachers in instructional matters as well as morale. The cooperation also reduces illiteracy and number of dropouts by making the students feel more successful in school. Implementing curricular congruence is not expensive, although the Long Island system used a seven-period day which required hiring additional instructors. A short inservice workshop that stresses the main goals of curricular congruence suffices to introduce teachers to the plan, and the workshop should focus on sameness of instructional materials, reading skills, and strategies stressed; direct instruction, use of remedial classes as supplements, rather than substitutes for regular instruction; and good communication among teachers and administration. This successful formula contrasts with unsuccessful programs in which teachers feel remedial students are the sole responsibility of learning center instructors. (Figures and references are appended.) (SKC)

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Needed: A Better Link

between the Learning Center and the Classroom

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In school districts throughout the United States, at-risk students are receiving remedial instruction in learning centers. Since these settings are outside of content-area classrooms, they increase the chances of providing activities that are fragmented and isolated. Consequently, students are more likely to complete workbook exercises and microcomputer activities that do not adequately support subject-area expectations. This separation of learning center and classroom also pressures students into quantity of learning; for example, one environment may stress specific words, concepts, and study skills, while the other setting may emphasize different content and strategies. Such quantity and diversity are a poor match for less able students who need instruction that is carefully planned and mutually supported in both remedial and regular programs. (Allington, Boxer, and Broikou, 1987; Allington and Shake, 1986; Allington, Stuetzel, Shake, and Lamarche, 1986; Johnston, Allington, Afflerbach, 1985)

A Better Link

Sometimes referred to as curricular congruence, learning center staff should provide remedial students with the content and strategies needed for achieving success in subject-matter classrooms (see Figure 1). Such an approach has been initiated at a Long Island high school where I serve as a consultant.

Briefly described, problem learners receive English instruction seven periods each week. Twice a week, most of the students remain for a double period, while at-risk learners attend the learning center for instructional experiences that support the English program.

For example, during several visitations to the learning center, I observed a small group of students reading and interpreting Paul Zindel's The Pigman. This book was chosen because it related well to the thematic structure of the literature program and because it was being used in the regular classroom. The remedial teacher selected from the book the same vocabulary and concepts highlighted in the English classroom, and she engaged the students in an active discussion. Included in this activity was semantic mapping which guided the students to organize pertinent information within categories. This strategy also helped individuals to build and activate their prior knowledge and, therefore, to read The Pigman with more fluency and comprehension. Supporting semantic mapping was a variation of Stauffer's (1969) Directed Reading Thinking Activity in which the teacher modeled prediction questions before and during the reading of Zindel's book. Then the teacher motivated learners to make their own predictions and to write them on the chalkboard. According to Richek (1987),

> This helps to dignify the students' predictions and provides a record of their thoughts. The few minutes needed to

record each student's prediction (with his or her name) are well worth the effort. (p. 634)

Making predictions impressed upon students the importance of being active thinkers when reading text. Throughout these small-group lessons, the remedial teacher carefully supported the content of the English classroom by first providing essential structure, then guiding students to apply the newly gained insights and strategies, and finally allowing individuals to practice on their own. The long-term goal of the remedial and classroom teachers is to help the students develop independence in the English classroom. Realistically, the teachers are aware that this goal may take years to fulfill.

The success of this link between the learning center and English classroom is largely the result of mutual planning time that is "built into" the teachers' schedules. English teachers are assigned weekly to twenty-four teaching periods and one mutual planning period with learning center staff (see Figure 2). During the planning session, the classroom and remedial teachers organize instruction that is congruent in both settings. To assure such congruence on a consistent basis, they also reflect on previous instruction and ask: "a) Was the same or similar type of instructional material employed in both settings? b) Was the same reading skill taught in both settings? c) Was the same reading strategy taught in both settings?" (Allington, Stuetzel, Shake, and Lamarche (1986, p. 19)

Benefits

The seven-period structure and its link to the learning center provide a variety of benefits, some of which are worth mentioning: 1. remedial learners spend more engaged time on activities that directly support success in the English program; 2. such support increases transfer of learning while it lessens fragmented exercises; 3. the teaching-learning commitment is long-term, offering remedial students the opportunity to attend the learning center up to four years; 4. teacher morale has been positive because the seven-period program has increased staffing during a stressful time of declining student enrollment and related teacher excessing.

Another positive aspect of connecting the learning center and the classroom is its potential for lessening illiteracy and dropout rates. The United States has approximately twenty-three million illiterates and is generating another four hundred thousand each year. These estimated figures are among the highest of industrialized nations in the world. Added to such catastrophic outcomes is the unusually high dropout rate in American schools, especially in inner cities. These negative trends strongly suggest that educators must improve their strategies for identifying and remedying young people's communication difficulties. Failure to meet this challenge will result in a lifetime of frustration for the problem learners and for the society in which they

attempt to function. A quality intervention, such as curricular congruence, is not a panacea, but it certainly is a positive step toward helping students become successful and independent.

Curricular Congruence: A Checklist

Interestingly, curricular congruence is not expensive to implement, provided the school already has a learning center with remedial personnel and appropriate resources. (Of course, if the seven-period structure is carried out, additional funding is needed for hiring classroom teachers.) The major source of support that remedial and classroom teachers need is inservice education. Full-day workshops (with release time provided by substitute teachers) are among the best formats for staff development. During the sessions, the participants should be exposed to specific ways in which the learning center and the classroom can support pertinent goals, content, strategies, and skills. The following checklist concerning curricular congruence may serve as a basic guide for areas to consider during inservice workshops, or it may be useful as a listing of reminders to consult during the school year. Although the checklist is not comprehensive,the items are gleaned from the literature of the field, especially from the research findings of Allington, Stuetzel, Shake, and Lamarche (1986).

1. The same or similar instructional resources are used in both settings. (Here, resources include basal readers,

materials containing skills that are easily transferable, and workbooks with paragraphs and longer passages emphasizing comprehension)

2. The same reading skills are stressed in both environments
3. The same reading strategies are emphasized in both locations
4. Substantial time in the learning center and the classroom is used for either direct instruction or teacher-directed silent reading of connected discourse with a comprehension focus
5. Learning center and classroom activities are organized in such a fashion that remedial services supplement rather than supplant the basic curriculum (Here, the seven-period structure and its link to the learning center are especially worthwhile)
6. The remedial and classroom teachers have a clear, updated understanding of the instructional emphases in both settings (If staff members are not scheduled for mutual planning and articulation, specific meetings are arranged for such important activities. In addition, observations during instructional activities are encouraged)
7. The building administrator or program coordinator demonstrates support for linking remedial efforts to the core program.

A Personal Comment

Although the Long Island high school discussed above represents a success story, I also visited or served as a consultant to other school districts for a variety of reasons. Unfortunately, if the reason concerned associations with the learning center and classroom, a negative scenario usually evolved. For example, in the vast majority of these schools, minimal congruence existed, and the causes for this lack of structure were varied. In some schools, the administrators and teachers did not believe in a philosophy of congruence. They felt that remedial learners' past failures were the result of conventional classroom instruction that was poorly matched with these students' needs; therefore, to continue with a similar focus would probably lead to ongoing failures. In other schools, educators indicated that linking the learning center and classroom was extremely difficult because of problems with scheduling students for both settings, organizing instruction for both locations, and providing mutual planning for both remedial and regular staff. Classroom teachers also openly admitted their perceptions that when students attended the learning center they became the exclusive responsibility of the remedial teacher. Although some of these reactions were genuinely intended, I strongly believe that curricular congruence could have been carried out more effectively if the educators with whom I met had been truly committed to the concept. Often, remedial teachers

revealed that their principals expected them to serve as quasi-administrators by making daily public address announcements, by performing clerical tasks, and by meeting with irate parents for matters unrelated to language arts. Not surprisingly, certain reading teachers who claimed to be the busiest admitted that they did not commence learning center instruction until mid-October and that they concluded instruction in mid-May. The reasons for such a short school year in the learning center concerned pre-assessment, post-assessment, and materials inventory. Consequently, this negative scenario suggests that in most of these schools remedial and classroom teachers have coordinated instruction in a less-than-desirable fashion, while in particular schools children have not even received fragmented remedial instruction for a substantial period of time.

These tentative conclusions are based on informal observations of remedial efforts in a small number of urban, rural, and suburban school districts. I therefore am not generalizing these conclusions. However, aspects of this scenario combined with research findings (Allington, Stuetzel, Shake, and Lamarche, 1986; Johnston, Allington, Afflerbach, 1985) reveal a less-than-optimal picture of what may be happening in other remedial reading programs and suggest better efforts are needed to coordinate remedial and classroom instruction.

Summary

Creating a closer link between the learning center and the classroom makes sense. The successful efforts described for the Long Island high school are only a capsule version of what curricular congruence actually represents. Other factors, including those in the checklist, also should be considered when attempting to support better associations with remedial and classroom staff. Although curricular congruence is not the only means of remedying the problems of remedial learners, it is a serious step toward lessening the illiteracy and school dropout rates in the United States.

Figure 1

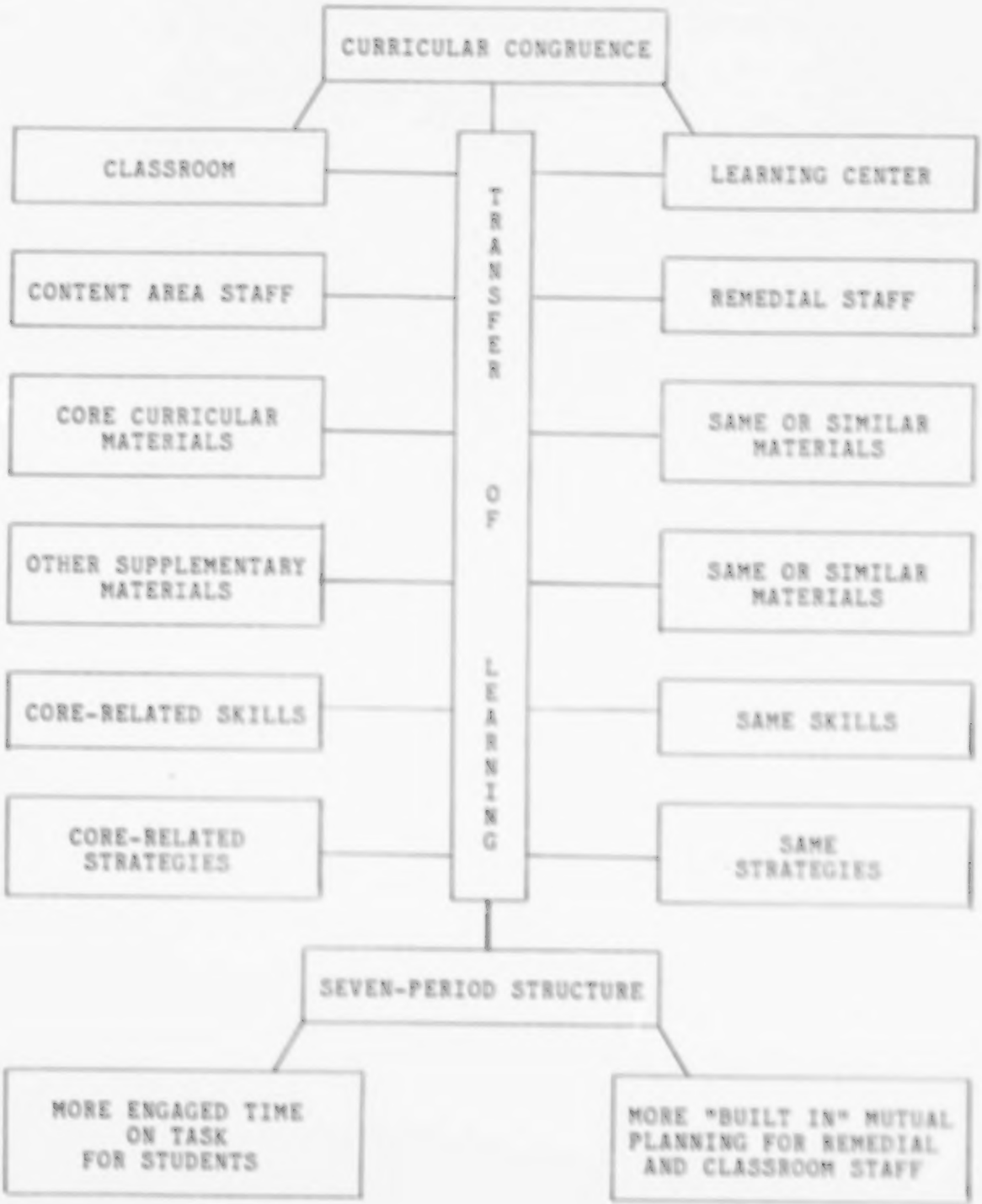
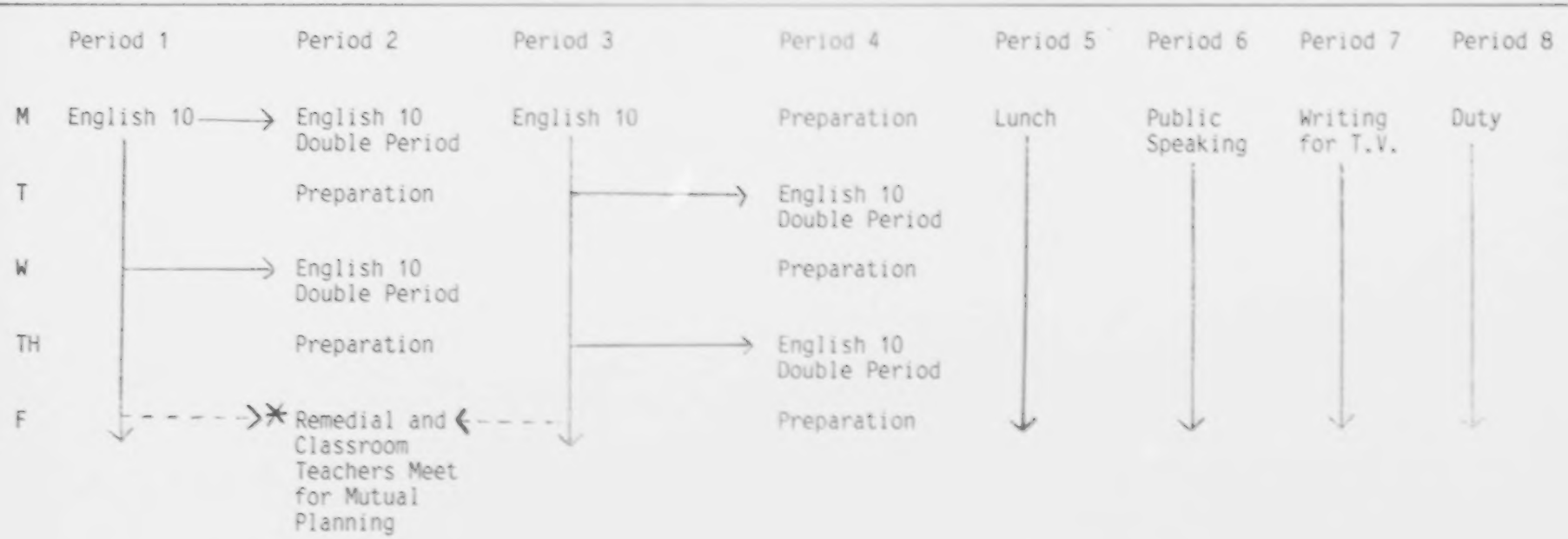

CURRICULAR CONGRUENCE
CLASSROOM
CONTENT AREA STAFF
CORE CURRICULAR MATERIALS
OTHER SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS
CORE-RELATED SKILLS
CORE-RELATED STRATEGIES
TRANSFER OF LEARNING
LEARNING CENTER
REMEDIAL STAFF
SAME OR SIMILAR MATERIALS
SAME OR SIMILAR MATERIALS
SAME SKILLS
SAME STRATEGIES
SEVEN-PERIOD STRUCTURE
MORE ENGAGED TIME ON TASK FOR STUDENTS
MORE "BUILT IN" MUTUAL PLANNING FOR REMEDIAL AND CLASSROOM STAFF

Figure 2

An English Teacher's Schedule

Reflecting Mutual Planning with Learning Center Staff*



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